

Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/101100/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Gassner, Gunter ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5891-6228> 2017.
Wrecking London's skyline? A political critique of how the city is viewed. City
21 (6) , pp. 754-768. file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1408994>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1408994>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Wrecking London's Skyline?

A political critique of how the city is viewed

By Dr Günter Gassner

In: **CITY: Critical analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action.**

Wrecking London's Skyline?

A political critique of how the city is viewed

Abstract

How can we develop a political critique of urban form at the time of a tall building boom? Pointing to limitations of interpreting towers as representations of finance and power, I introduce an understanding of skylines as phantasmagoria of capitalist culture: a dazzling image that abstracts from the commodified urban landscape by promoting its further commodification. I show that both professionals who argue for and those who argue against the construction of tall office buildings in London approach the city's 'new skyline' as an easily marketable visual reproduction that is defined as a compositional whole: a bounded composition with St Paul's Cathedral at its centre. I claim that this approach and the widespread idea that commercial skyscrapers 'destroy' the historic cityscape assume an element of integrity that is ideological and which itself must be 'ruined'. My argument for a shift of the ways in which cityscapes are viewed draws on Walter Benjamin's critical montages and allegories. I explore his reading of ruins as emblems of the fragility and destructiveness of capitalist culture and his understanding of ruination as a form of critique. My argument for ruining the cityscape's 'beautiful appearance' focuses on compositional wholeness and symbolic coherence. In so doing, I provide an interpretation of skylines that sheds light to the ways in which financial capitalism is justified by a specific way of viewing the city and the ways in which it is embedded in texts that are deemed to be socially meaningful.

Keywords

Cityscape, London, Financial Capitalism, Phantasmagoria, Benjamin

London's towering cityscape

According to a survey published in March 2015, 263 buildings over 20 storeys were either proposed, had been approved or were in the process of being built in London (*Building Design*, 17 March 2015). Following another survey a year later, there were already 436 skyscrapers in the pipeline (*New London Architecture*, 9 March 2016). While some of the proposed developments might never be built and while it is difficult to come up with a robust way of defining tallness, there is no doubt that London's cityscape, which has changed so visibly in the last fifteen years, will change even more drastically. In 2001, the former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone announced that 'high buildings should be assessed by what they add to the skyline, rather than what they take away' (*Independent*, 12 June 2001). Arguably, this statement heralded the current tall building boom. It comes as a surprise, then, that although many high-rise developments attracted a great deal of media attention and future scenarios of London's skylines featured prominently in various newspapers, it was not before 2013 that some architects, artists and historians organised against the boom under the so-called 'Skyline Campaign' – a campaign that aims to 'stop the devastation of badly designed and poorly placed tall buildings'.

Eighty per cent of the proposed tall buildings are residential towers and so much of today's critique of urban form is related to the housing question. Vertical urban housing consolidates a 'landscape of power' (Zukin, 1991) in which power relations can be read off the cityscape in a literal way (see Graham, 2015a; 2015b). At a time when affordable housing is desperately needed, the construction of luxury apartments that offer great views across the city is arguably

a provocation. This article, however, does not explore the politics of housing in London. I draw attention to the ways in which office towers are viewed and assessed instead. Despite being outnumbered, centrally located in or adjacent to the City of London (hereafter City) these buildings raise important questions about the ways in which we make sense of the contemporary city. They draw our attention to the city's commodification – the domination of economic over use values – as well as its financialisation – the increasing power of firms that engage in profit-accumulation through the servicing and exchanging of financial instruments. We know of the crucial role of the housing market for urbanisation processes under financialised capitalism (Moreno, 2014; Harvey 2012). Yet, how do architects, planners and urban historians make sense of buildings that accommodate – not exclusively but to a large extent – financial and business services? Studies show that the financial sector has grown and not contracted since the global financial crisis in 2008. It has benefited from attempts of governments in Europe and the US to deal with the crisis. Big banks are now bigger, the shadow banking system is taking over more activity and the rich have become richer (*Financial Times*, 12 September 2013). Accordingly, office tower construction did not stop or slow down in recent years. Indeed, office space booms in the City to levels not seen in fifteen years (*City A.M.*, 19 June 2015). If tower cranes in central London point to increasing levels of capital accumulation, wealth concentration and indebtedness, how, then, can we develop a political critique of urban form through the city's visual appearance?

In the last few years I have spent some time analysing the ways in which design-related professionals conceptualise contemporary cityscape. The empirical arguments presented in this article are based on textual and visual analyses of different planning documents including Design Statements and Environmental Statements. With regard to the latter, I focused on Townscape and Visual Assessments, which are documents in which townscape consultants assess the visual impact of a proposed development on prominent buildings and historic sites of the city. I also examined reports by Historic England (formerly known as English Heritage) and the advice this government-servicing body gave to local planning authorities in planning processes. I gained insights into the practices of professionals through informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with architects, planners and urban historians who were involved in the planning processes of two key projects in the City: the Heron Tower – a 230 metres tall office building that is located on Bishopsgate and which was opened in 2012 – and the Pinnacle – an office building that was planned to be the tallest and most iconic tower in the City and whose construction stopped in 2013 after the developers failed to sign a major pre-let agreement.

It became evident that visual arguments have a powerful role in planning processes (Charney, 2007; Tavernor, 2004a; 2004b; 2007). It also became clear that professionals read urban form in a specific way. As we shall see, the 'new London skyline' is conceptualised as a singular and bounded composition with a visually protected historic building at its centre. In his election campaign in 2007, Boris Johnson criticised Livingstone's pro-tower approach, accusing him of 'wrecking London's skyline' (*Building Design*, 2 October 2007). I argue that the visual protection of historic buildings that both former mayors ended up advocating just like Simon Jenkins' statement that Livingstone and Johnson 'are gripped by a phallic obsession that is destroying London's skyline' (*Evening Standard*, 29 November 2011) assume an element of integrity that is ideological and which must be 'ruined'. An epistemological shift is needed in order to critically engage with current urbanisation processes. The conceptual repertoire developed by the German-Jewish critical theorist Walter Benjamin provides important insights

for this shift. For Benjamin, redeeming the city from capitalist culture involves the recognition of its ruined character. Ruination, for him, is also a form of critique of not merely the physical but the social and political world. It is a critique that finds equivalents in the 'realm of things' and the 'realm of thoughts' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 178). It is this extended and critical understanding of ruination that is required to expose statements about the 'wrecking' of a historic skyline as a distraction from urbanisation under financialised capitalism.

This article commences with a brief explanation of how academics have interpreted urban form as an expression of the city's political economy before I introduce an understanding of skylines as representations of the city that are designed to distract from its commodification by promoting its further commodification. I then explore the ways in which both professionals who argue for and those who argue against the construction of office towers conceptualise the cityscape and selected historic buildings therein. The first of these explorations focuses on the common understanding of the 'new London skyline' as a compositional whole; an understanding that I contest drawing on Benjamin's critical montages in which elements are 'never unified into a seamless whole' (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 164). My second exploration revolves around the symbolic coherence of St Paul's, which I discuss in reference to Benjamin's distinction between symbols and allegories. I will conclude that the ruination of an easily marketable city image that centres on a historic building of apparent civic importance involves a shift in the way the city is being viewed. This shift is required in order to open up a political space for alternative cityscapes.

Skylines as phantasmagoria

David Harvey's (2008) analysis of urbanisation's 'particularly active role [...] in absorbing the surplus product that capitalists are perpetually producing in their search for surplus value' (p. 25) is seminal for understanding capitalism's history and as well as its current financialised form. This does not mean that financial capitalism requires skyscrapers. Its key institutions can also be located in groundscrapers or multiple small buildings. Yet, a tall building boom is a significant phase in capitalist urbanisation because buildings' effectiveness as a terrain of continued reinvestment is rendered particularly visible. Once iconic towers start populating long views, it becomes increasingly difficult to turn a blind eye to the ways in which the state acts as a hands-off manager of projects that are fully developed by private developers (Harvey, 1989). These buildings hint at the current significance of the production of 'postcard views' (Kaika and Thielen, 2006, p. 66), which aim to attract private entrepreneurs and revenue-generating tourists. They also pose crucial questions regarding the culture of image making. How is capitalism justified by urban culture and how is it embedded in texts that constitute urban culture (see Jones, 2009)? These questions are important because, as we shall see, in the professional production of London's cityscape, the financial sector is neither contested nor simply celebrated. Rather, it is rendered productive for texts that are deemed to be socially meaningful.

Capitalist cityscapes are regularly interpreted in reference to the maxim of modernism that reads 'form follows function' and which was coined by Louis Sullivan in his artistic consideration of the tall office building in 1896. Analysing the transformation of the built environment in New York City and Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Carol Willis (1995) suggests that urban form follows finance. Willis pays great attention to the ways in which economic cycles shape tall building construction and acknowledges that other factors – 'the effects of human actions and decisions and of imposed patterns and policies –

affect design solutions' (pp. 15–16), too. While economic forces shape urban form, urban form also has economic agency: finance follows form. Towers are not merely built to respond to an existing or predicted demand for office space but also in order to create further demand. Owned by private developers, they follow the logic of demand creation and an ideology of economic growth. This is why the common criticism that London does not need more office towers because the ones that have been already built are not fully rented out is misguided. More towers need to be built so that more towers can be built. Furthermore, a particular economic imaginary gains plausibility when it is discursively and visually anchored in urban space. In Vienna, for example, office towers are used to both demonstrate the city's already existing success as an international business location as well as to further attract international actors (Grubbauer, 2014, p. 346). The need for the city to become more competitive within the network of advanced business service industries is frequently represented as a matter of fact and '[a]ctions taken on behalf of urban competitiveness are represented as actions taken on behalf of the city as a whole' (Davidson and Iveson, 2014, pp. 2–3; see also Swyngedouw, 2009; 2011). World class ranking and a skyline's power to attract global investment are foregrounded (McNeill, 2002a).

Another interpretation suggests that form follows power. As Jones (2009) shows, a discussion of the relationship between architecture and power must acknowledge at least two aspects: first, architects' dependency on the economically powerful for their commissions and, second, the mobilisation of architecture as a resource by those in power (p. 2521). In 'Form follows Power', Maria Kaika and Korinna Thielen (2006) explore the latter and develop a genealogy of so-called 'urban shrines', which they define as buildings of superior scale in prime city locations. The authors suggest that these buildings represent and visually dominate their physical context as long as the authority they represent remains in power. A skyline that is heavily populated by office towers, then, represents financial capitalism and global finance whereas urban shrines in the industrial city represented technology and money power and those in the pre-industrial city state and church authority. However, form is not merely a representation of power. It also impacts on power relations. In another article, Kaika (2011) interprets iconic architecture in the City of London as 'an urban totem, ie not only a means of *expressing/signifying* existing elite power, but also one of the most effective means for *instituting* new elite power, and constituting new social relations as real or naturalised during moments of social, economic, or political change' (p. 970). The 'City skyline', then, also needs to be understood in terms of 'a new set of symbolic values, a new radical imaginary for a new generation of transnational elites' (ibid.), which is why power follows form, too.

Crucially, in these accounts 'power' usually refers to 'authority'. The hallmark of the latter, as Hannah Arendt (1970) suggests, is that it is 'recognised by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed' (p. 45). One of the key aspects of an authoritative skyline is that it represents the city as if there is a consensus on what the city ought to be, promoting some urban and economic activities over others (see Davidson and Iveson, 2014; Harris, 2008; Campkin, 2013). Opening up a space that critically engages with this apparent consensus, I suggest, involves an understanding of form that is not limited to a representation of external forces. The form of so-called 'iconic towers', Jones (2011) argues, is their function. One of the purposes of this building type is the development of a 'strong association to place through an instantly recognizable form designated to be both distinctive and widely disseminated in this mediated form' (p. 120). By means of easily recognisable and memorable forms these buildings often stand for a 'desire to stress disjuncture with the past' (ibid., p.

123). They tend to be a 'materialization of forward-looking change' (ibid.) that supposedly stands in opposition to a historicist approach to the city.

However, as we shall see, such an opposition is not characteristic of how professionals view London's tall building boom. It is crucial to stress the commonalities advocates and opponents of office towers share and to pay attention to the hopes and fears that define their points of view on the city. Those of us who are willing to accept a limited and erroneous historical narrative about the city that suggests that the 'new London skyline' represents economic wealth that the City brings to 'London and the country as a whole' (CoL, 2002, p. 141) must be reminded that historically skyscraper construction tended to be 'characterised by bursts of sporadic, but intense activity that coincided with easy credit, rising land prices and excessive optimism, but often by the time the buildings were finished, the economy had slipped into recession' (*The Guardian*, 11 January 2012). Building tall is a sign of a building boom, which often implies the misallocation of capital. In other words, if the 'new London skyline' represents wealth it also represents an imminent economic crash. Arguably, a skyline is a site of speculations, wants and aspirations; a site of miscalculation and deceiving representations of the past, present and future. It is such an understanding of towers that is related to yet absent from current architectural debates about 'affects' and the 'function of form' such as the one presented by Farshid Moussavi (2009).

Benjamin's (2002) conceptualisations of phantasmagoria and ruination provide important insights for a topical reading of skylines. In his book on the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin (1998) reads ruins as 'emblematic of the futility [...] of human civilization, out of which history was read as "a process of relentless disintegration"' (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 161). In the Baroque era, processes of decay found expression in corpses, skulls and physical ruins as well as ruins 'in the realm of thoughts' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 178). The Baroque produces 'a history from nature and transforms history into nature in a world that no longer has its center', as Gilles Deleuze (2006, p. 143) puts it. I will return to this point later in this article. In the modern city, Benjamin suggests, ruins are not only emblems of the fragility of capitalist culture but also of its destructiveness. A key dimension of capitalism's destructiveness is its mythological nature. Modern capitalism, for Benjamin (2002), is a 'natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces' (p. 391 [K1a,8]). In the *Passagen-Werk*, he sets out to recover forms of 'primal history' (ibid., p. 393 [K2a,1]) in order to allow a historical awakening. The method he employs includes the surrealist montage technique and a notion of 'involuntary memory' inspired by Marcel Proust's writing. Crucially, in contrast to surrealists, Benjamin (2002) does not 'persist within the realm of dream' but aims 'to find the constellation of awakening' (p. 458 [N1,9]). What he shares with them, however, is the idea that things that have become obsolete, neglected and forgotten encapsulate latent energies and that through constellations these energies can be transformed into an intoxicating, revolutionary experience (ibid., 2005a, p. 210). Parisian arcades, these formerly eclectic consumption spaces that have become functionally and socially obsolete and replaced by department stores in the twentieth century encapsulate such latent energies. In the nineteenth century, they are places where the commodity is 'glorified' [*verklärt*] (Benjamin, 1991, Band V) or, better, where its exchange value is glorified by creating a framework that pushes its use value into the background. This is why modern architecture owes its existence not merely to the industrial order of production. It contains in itself 'something unfulfilled, never to be fulfilled within the confines of capitalism' (Tiedemann, 2002, p. 933). It accommodates and represents the 'lustre' [*Schein*] (Benjamin, 1991, Band V) with which the commodity-

producing society surrounds itself; a form of distraction from and entertainment of the commodity-producing society. Architecture itself is a phantasmagoria: a deceptive image that is designed to dazzle and which concerns the whole capitalist production process. This means that we cannot limit our investigation to the emergence of the commodity 'in the image of the city' (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 187). We must examine the ways in which the city is commodified in the form of an image or, better, a visual reproduction.

In the *Exposé* of 1939, Benjamin frames the *Passagen-Werk* around the notion of phantasmagoria and relates it to an understanding of commodity-fetishism that differs from the one proposed by Karl Marx. For Marx (1990), the fetish character of the commodity has a revealing function inasmuch as features of man's labour appear to him as what, according to Marx, they actually are in capitalist society: 'material relations between persons and social relations between things' (p. 166). For Benjamin, in turn, the fetish character of the commodity means that the commodity-producing society is able to abstract from the fact that it produces commodities. In other words, Benjamin (2002) extends Marx's conceptualisation and applies it to society itself: the 'property appertaining to the commodity as its fetish character attaches as well to the commodity-producing society—not as it is in itself, to be sure, but more as it represents itself and thinks to understand itself whenever it abstracts from the fact that it produces precisely commodities' (p. 669 [X13a]). As we shall see, this aspect speaks to the way in which professionals view skylines. The construction of the 'new London skyline' is therefore not merely a tool that is used to attract global investment. It is also a distraction from the city's commodification that requires the city to be further commodified in order to create a commodity that distracts from commodification, and so on and so forth.

Compositional wholeness and Critical montage

How do professionals look at London's tall building boom? While a great number of different views are assessed in planning processes, it is usually only a small number that plays a critical role in negotiations between private developers and local authorities. Among the 176 assessed views in the case of the Heron Tower and the 78 assessed views in the case of the Pinnacle, the most debated one was the distant view from Waterloo Bridge towards the City in the distance. According to an architect, it is this view that the news media uses 'when pictures of London are sent around the world', which is 'what the City Planning Officer was particularly concerned with when designing the top of the building [Heron Tower]'. Because Waterloo Bridge is located where the River Thames bends, it offers a free line of vision towards the wider city and provides 'the best panorama of the City of London where you see the whole of the City and St Paul's more or less in the centre of the view', a historian suggested in an interview. This particular skyline is not only a media view but also a 'protected vista' (GLA, 2012) in which the 'strategically important landmark' St Paul's Cathedral is visually protected as a result of its 'civic importance' (CABE, 2000). This view is constructed as a historicist image of the city just as much as a world city image. It is based on the idea that the cathedral is a building of architectural and historic significance that must remain highly visible. Yet, office towers need to be visible too, because they point to the City's on-going success as a powerful and well-connected node within the network of advanced business service industries (see Pain, 2009; McNeill, 2002b; 2006). The 'new London skyline' is best understood as a space that is defined by an ideology of economic growth and a static, highly limited framing of 'civic importance'. How, however, are these two in the forms of commercial towers and historic monuments related to each other?

The Heron Tower has a stepped skyline profile. In views from Waterloo Bridge, it steps up and away from St Paul's, 'deferring to' the cathedral. Architects emphasised that this profile allowed them 'to define a line' that rises 'from the edge near the cathedral up towards the centre of the cluster' of tall buildings in the City. Historic England welcomed this strategy. By means of creating a smooth edge of the high-rise cluster the 'readability of St Paul's is improved', a historian claimed. Based on this reading, the Deputy Prime Minister suggested that the Heron Tower 'would actually enhance the setting of the Cathedral [which] would no longer be seen in competition with Tower 42' (OoDPM, 2002, p. 56). The Pinnacle was also framed as a building that contributes positively to the cluster because it fills an existing sky gap. According to an architect, the City Planning Officer felt that it was important that 'he could argue publicly that the cluster would be formed as one group'. When there is 'too much' distance between buildings then 'what you want to do is fill in the missing tooth, because isolated buildings compete with St Paul's'. In addition, the Pinnacle was described as a building that will provide a strong, iconic centre point for the high-rise cluster. A townscape consultant argued that the skyscraper 'will taper upwards, and with the curving spiral a form will be created that will work effectively with the stepped top of Tower 42 and the sensual curves of 30 St Mary Axe. The spiral will also reinforce the idea of a visual centre of the cluster, which can hold visually, as an inward force – centripetally – the array of different shaped tall buildings around it'.

Both the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle were framed as buildings that contribute positively to the group of already existing high-rise buildings and, in so doing, visually enhance St Paul's. In an interview an architect suggested that 'the idea of a cluster is one that the Corporation of London has supported because they can say, well, there is a benefit to certain tall buildings in certain locations; it's actually enhancement rather than it [the tower] being talked about [...] in a negative way'. Increasing the number of tall buildings is offered as a strategy that results in the improved readability of the historic St Paul's. Therefore, visual protection concerns not only limit the construction of towers in certain locations. They also enable and support the construction of towers elsewhere. Commercial skyscrapers populate the city under the pretext of monument conservation. I conclude that as long as the visual dominance of individual historic buildings is not brought into question, a debate about capitalist urbanisation that the Skyline Campaign rightly demands is unlikely to take place. The problem with claims that commercial skyscrapers 'wreck' the skyline is not that they are ineffective but that they are counterproductive. The suggestion that London's historic skyline needs to be preserved assumes an element of integrity that is ideological and which must be 'ruined'. It is based on an essentialist image of a well-ordered city, in which buildings of civic significance dominate the cityscape and singular views represent the city 'as a whole' (Strauss, 1976, p. 5). Such a reading of the city abstracts from power relations in urbanisation processes just like the suggestion that iconic towers visually enhance St Paul's. What is needed, I argue, is a political debate about the ways in which monument conservation works in the service of financial capitalism rather than the other way round.

The distinction that Charles Jencks' (2006) draws between historic monuments that are in decline and iconic towers that are driven by media spectacle and are here to stay sits uncomfortably within a discourse that revolves around the monumentalisation of historic buildings. It is not that iconicity is not the result of the market but that the wider cityscape – and certain historic buildings in particular – are commodified. Rather than reading office towers as urban shrines of financialised capitalism that are in tension with pre-modern urban

shrines, we must understand the role of pre-modern urban shrines in and for financialised capitalism. The discursive construction of the 'new London skyline' puts questions to the argument that iconic towers are merely objects that 'try to dominate the urban skyline and the public imagination' (Kaika and Thielen, 2005, p. 63). This is why I suggest that claims according to which commercial skyscrapers 'defer to' St Paul's should not be dismissed as nothing more than an 'easy way to get planning permission' (Jencks, 2006, p. 12). They must be unpacked because they point to an important commonality between advocates and opponents of commercial skyscrapers: the understanding of a skyline as a compositional whole. Here, a skyline is conceived as a frontally composed and bounded perspective. It has a carefully controlled inside and a neglected outside. It is a visual performance that is meant to 'please the admiring eye' (Boyer, 1996, p. 396). Wholeness is derived from a logic of internal coherence: each element has a determined relationship to other elements and the whole. This is why professionals see value in comparing computer-generated views of the city's possible future appearance with enframed historic paintings from nearby viewpoints. In the planning processes for the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, Historic England assessed the proposed towers in reference to Antonio Canaletto's painting of St Paul's from Somerset House Terrace from the mid-1750s and argued that the cathedral was the visually prominent structure in the city for centuries and that this role should not be redefined. A townscape consultant, on the other hand, assessed the towers in reference to John O'Connor's 'The Victoria Embankment and St Paul's from Somerset House River Terrace' from 1874, suggesting that London's skylines always changed according to economic demands of the time and that while the nineteenth century skyline was 'interrupted by large smoke and/or steam-belching cylindrical stacks' (Tavernor, 2002) the twenty-first century skyline might as well be interrupted by office towers. The different conclusions that were drawn used the same method and the same conceptualisation of a skyline as a compositional whole.

It is important, therefore, to acknowledge that a city that is shaped by the free market does not necessarily look 'chaotic'. Reducing the cityscape to a singular skyline and conceptualising it as a compositional whole is a neoliberal approach in that it is based on the belief that one must govern not because of but for the market (see Foucault, 2010). This is a crucial point because even if the visual protection of St Paul's goes back to a gentlemen's agreement between the City Corporation, the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's and City developers in the 1930s, from the 1970s onwards – and with the construction of Tower 42 in particular – it has increasingly been turned into a planning tool that benefits the construction of additional skyscrapers. This is why the very idea of an urban view as a controlled composition must be subverted. If, in addition, we are critical of a city that is solely shaped by market forces with as little intervention by the state as possible – a liberal cityscape in the classical sense – then we must find a way in which the visual relationship between buildings is not fixed for the market but opens up a space for urban politics.

Benjamin's radical conceptual repertoire is crucial in this context. His critical montages are informed by the surrealist montage principle of juxtaposing seemingly incongruous elements. Surrealist artists like André Breton argued that this juxtaposition allows images to come into being that are unconventional and politically unsettling. Indeed, the political dimension of the surrealist montage lies in its destabilisation of the current visual order by bringing together pieces 'that the reigning conceptual structures habitually [hold] apart' (Cohen, 2014; 1995). Crucially, rather than unifying elements into a compositional whole, different elements are brought into tension. The control of a 'perfect' and stable whole is anti-political inasmuch as it

ultimately silences dissenting voices; it does not let criticality in. One political dimension of the *Passagen-Werk* is precisely that it is not a linear text but a collection of citations from a 'vast array of historical sources, which Benjamin filed with the barest minimum of commentary' (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. ix). The citations are re-assembled in radical and illuminating constellations. Benjamin's (2002) ambition is to practice 'the art of citing without quotation marks', which he understands as 'intimately related to that of montage' (p. 458 [N1,10]). To cite means to 'tear from context, to destroy' (2005b, p. 455). This de-contextualisation is a form of judgement by calling the word 'back to its origin' (Dodd, 2008, p. 419). The aim of de-contextualisation and constellation is to shock and to awaken, and this is the crucial point. Many cityscapes – and that of the City in particular – are characterised by the juxtaposition of difference: different building types, styles, age of buildings, and so forth. However, only when differences open up a space for urban politics then they are 'critical'. Put differently, what makes an urban montage critical is the wholeness it encapsulates.

The wholeness that Benjamin identifies with regard to the critical montage is related to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's notion of the monad, which refers to an atom at one level and reflecting the complete world at the same time. The monad is based on a pantheistic conception of nature, according to which every fragment of Creation 'contains and indicates its divine origin, intimates God' (Gilloch, 2002, p. 71). Each element possesses, in miniature, the totality of which it is a part. It expresses the sum of the world and is 'marked by "totality"' (Finkelde, 2009). Benjamin identifies monadological wholeness in forms of de-contextualisation and constellation. First, he argues that the element that is wrenched 'destructively from its context' (2005b, p. 454) is a monad. 'If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession', he writes, 'that is because its monadological structure demands it' (2002, p. 475 [N10,3]). Second, the realisation of a dialectical process is a monad (ibid., p. 476 [N11,4]). When the opposition between parts is greatest, when *then* and *now* are dialectically opposed, then, for a moment, historical continuity is disrupted and past and present recognise each other and form an image (Benjamin, 2002, p. 462 [N2a,3]). For Benjamin, the disruption of historical continuity is a moment of awakening. It is a moment of becoming that conveys a true and redemptive image of history and that is 'whole'.

Monadological wholeness counters compositional wholeness. This is particularly important because the monad, as Deleuze (2006) shows, can be understood as a 'sort of point of view on the city' (p. 26) in which the whole city is expressed. As such, it is also based on two selections: first, a selection that distinguishes the city from other possible cities and, second, a selection within the city because each monad has a 'clear zone' but also a 'dark area', the latter of which is the clear zone of another monad. Monadology is therefore related to a perspectivism that is not based on representativeness as we find it in historicism. It is also not one that insists on 'a relativity of what is true' but, instead, on 'a truth of relativity' (ibid., p. 23). In the Waterloo Bridge view that has a clear zone (office towers and St Paul's in the City) and a dark area (other activities and economies in the city) the whole city is expressed in a 'unity that envelopes a multiplicity' (ibid., p. 25). Office towers and St Paul's are not representative of the city but the relationship between the virtual that is actualised in this view and the possible that is realised in urban space opens up a potential that escapes the city as it is currently structured and governed (see ibid., p. 120). Deleuze explores this relationship by means of the infinite Baroque fold that moves between 'matter and soul, the façade and the closed room, the outside and the inside' (ibid., p. 39). 'Unthought' is folded into thought (Finkelde, 2009).

Monadological wholeness, in this sense, cannot be a stable and stabilising whole as promoted by the state: “‘monadological’ points of view can be interlinked only on a nomad space” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2016, p. 574). It is a form of wholeness that opens up a space for alternative cities based on a non-representative reading of urban form.

Benjamin also works with the category of wholeness not merely in order to offer a critique of false ideology but to attack the boundedness of ideology itself. His transformation of urban images into dialectical images to the extent that in this process they are subject to an illumination from within focuses on the monad’s history. Blasted out of the continuum of history, the de-contextualised object contains its history: ‘[i]ts history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless’ (1998, p. 47; see also Wolin, 1994). Crucially, inward history encapsulates multiple stories of success as well as failure. Exploring these stories liberates us from the tyranny of ‘empath[ising] with the victor’, which Benjamin (2006b, p. 406) identifies as one of the key characteristics of historicism and which, I argue, stabilises compositional wholeness. The entanglement of an ideology of economic growth with historicism ‘glorifies’ the history of financialised capitalism and the financialisation of history. St Paul’s must not be reduced to a tourist attraction or a centre of a global city image. It needs to be wrenched out of the continuum of history. The values that professionals attach to individual buildings on the ‘new London skyline’ are fundamentally put into question once we understand St Paul’s not merely in terms of a success history but also in terms of defeated histories that produced and produce the building as we know it today. And to be sure, office towers have multiple and failed histories, too.

In short, monadological wholeness counters compositional wholeness based on an understanding of a skyline not as an object that is representative of the city but as a point of view in which the city is expressed. This, I suggest, opens up a creative potential for alternative cityscapes as well as a space for re-reading of the city’s multiple built and unbuilt histories. If the latter is crucial for the former, then the recognition of the city as a functional, political and social ruin – before, during and after a tall building boom – is crucial.

Symbol and Allegory

The critical montage counters bounded ideologies by allowing wholeness to come into being always anew. It is a broken representation. Unlike the mosaic, which is also made up of de-contextualised elements, it does not put these elements together into a stable whole but juxtaposes difference, creating an eternal instability. Much of today’s criticism of London’s tall office building boom is counterproductive because it substitutes one ideology with another one. Both city images – the image of a city whose pre-modern urban shrines remain unchallenged and the image of a city in which capitalist urbanisation is put in its place by a historical urban shrine – are stabilising ‘myths’. They abstract from commodification and financialisation processes based on the suggestion that we should empathise with a story of success. I suggest that a critical engagement with these processes must target both standard compositions: the sacred and the capitalist skyline. Arguably, destabilising the visual centre of a composition has promise to ruin its wholeness from within. Each and every building must be part of a process of re-interpretation, which puts a clear-cut distinction between ‘buildings of national and historic interest’ and economically driven building height that professionals are comfortable with since the 1930s into question.

St Paul’s is monumentalised and capitalised on. Discursively constructed as a prominent

structure in the city, it requires constantly new towers to appear in order to reaffirm its central position. The historiographical approach that monadological wholeness relates to, i.e. 'carry[ing] over the principle of montage into history' (Benjamin, 2002, p. 461 [N2,6]), does not only mean to make use of the 'rags, the refuse' (ibid., p. 460 [N1a,8]). Yes, seemingly banal and trivial features of the city, the mute, the marginal and the oppressed are crucial because monuments represent a deceptive vision of the past. However, phenomena need to be rescued '[n]ot only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain of their dissemination, their "enshrinement as heritage"' (ibid., p. 473 [N9,4]). With regard to the 'new London skyline', the enshrinement of St Paul's as heritage covers up 'the revolutionary moments of the course of history' (2006a, p. 163) by propagandising the continuity of capitalism. Given the cathedral's central role on the 'new London skyline', what, one interviewee asked, is its 'symbolic significance'?

The cathedral is built in the Baroque style. A townscape consultant suggested that as 'the first purpose-built Protestant Cathedral' it is 'a great symbol of the Baroque era'. He also claimed that it is a 'symbol of the once supreme authority of the Anglican Church' as well as a 'symbol of the British Monarchy' (Tavernor, 2002). Furthermore, he stated that St Paul's 'has become an icon of international significance for modern times too. During the 20th century it provided a backdrop for the major state ceremonials that were broadcasted to the Commonwealth and around the world. The internationally famous war photographs show it rising phoenix-like through the fires and smoke of the Blitz, when large swathes of the City were destroyed once again' (ibid.). A historian emphasised that the cathedral is valued 'for lots of different reasons, not purely aesthetic, but for its historic, what we feel about it, its community values'; it is 'not just a religious symbol' but an 'internationally recognised symbol in the London skyline' (CoL, 2002, p. 155). It is the most prominent structure of a townscape that 'symbolises the continuity of the City's long established business role and its importance to London and the country as a whole' (ibid., p. 141). In short, St Paul's is offered as a symbol of the Baroque era, the Anglican Church, the British Monarchy, Britain's resistance against the Nazi regime and the capitalist city as a whole. The result of this overloading with multiple different meanings is a ruination of symbolic coherence. St Paul's collective meaning, its 'civic importance' becomes 'personal' or, in Deleuze's (2006) words, 'it itself overflows its frame in order to enter into a cycle or a series, and now the concept is what is increasingly compressed, interiorized, wrapped in an instance that can ultimately be called "personal"' (p. 144). The important question for my discussion is less to what extent symbolic coherence existed in the past than what the critical potential of a breaking-apart between an object and a singular meaning is. Struggles over the meanings associated with architectural icons always exist (Jones, 2009). What about the ones associated with a monument?

Drawing on Benjamin's early work, we must understand St Paul's not as a symbol of the Baroque era but as a Baroque allegory. Like the symbol, allegory is a figure of speech in which one element or object signifies something else. In contrast to the symbol, however, it is part of a chain of multiple and unpredictable meanings in which 'any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 175). Meaning is solely bestowed by the allegorist and allegory may 'as referents multiply, suddenly reverse direction to act as the negation of its other possible meanings' (Gilloch, 2002, p. 80). Here, multiplication and negation result in the hollowing out of a stable collective meaning. This is why the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, as Benjamin suggests, is not a minor classical drama. It must be understood

according to its own inner criterion with allegory and not symbolism as its main poetic device. What Benjamin later describes as the 'destructive power of the allegorical intention' (2006a, p. 165) is for him the consequent way of looking at a world in which man's relation to the absolute has become problematic. The Baroque is offered as a 'fragmented age' with 'politicoreligious problems' (1998, p. 160) or, as Deleuze (2006) puts it, 'a world that no longer has its center' (p. 143). Allegories are the only absolute without being themselves absolutes and the idea of the *Trauerspiel* lies in its representation of 'human life as the futile search for meaning in an abandoned world' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 58). Allegory, in this sense, relates to a critical ruination, to a process of decay, which finds expression in corpses, skulls and ruins. Benjamin shows that the baroque cult of the ruin unfolds in physical ruins as well as ruins 'in the realm of thoughts' (ibid., p. 177). Allegory, in this sense, is related to the dissolution of myth. 'In the search for truth', as Graeme Gilloch (2002) puts it, 'both allegory and criticism are concerned with the ruination of (beautiful) appearance and the illusion of totality which characterize the work of art and in particular the symbol' (p. 83).

Reading the 'new London skyline' as a beautiful and deceiving commodified image of the city, as a total work of art that needs to be ruined, involves an understanding of the commodity itself as an allegory. In the commodity value outshines meaning (Benjamin, 2002, p. 347 [J67,2]). The only 'meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning' (ibid., p. 369 [J80,2]). The commodity's use value is emptied out, leaving an arbitrary exchange value. To be sure, here, the relationship between the commodity and allegory that Benjamin proposes is closer to Marx's than his own conceptualisation of commodity-fetishism as a form of distraction from the social organisation of production. The allegorical gaze discovers the 'true' meaning of the commodity rather than glorifies its exchange value. Put differently, the hollowing out of a stable meaning of St Paul's destabilises the visual centre and hence the compositional wholeness of the 'new London skyline'. In so doing, it contests the reduction of the city to a visual reproduction. However, this contestation has its limitations. Yes, both montage and allegory are related to ruination as a method of critique. However, while in the former de-contextualised elements are re-assembled, to the latter an equivalent constructive impulse is foreign. The allegorical gaze both shatters the 'harmonious façade of the world' (ibid., p. 329 [J55a,3]) and preserves the pieces. Allegory 'holds fast on to ruins' (ibid., p. 329 [J56,1]). It destroys but does not construct because it is 'nowhere concerned with the abolition of what falls to it' (ibid., p. 331 [J57,3]). As a result, the destabilisation of the visual centre of the 'new London skyline', which encapsulates a fundamental critique of bounded ideology, is easily dismissed as nothing else than a sign that historic monuments are in decline.

Wrecked, Destroyed, Ruined

Contemporary iconic towers are driven by the corporate sector (Jencks, 2006; Kaika and Thielen, 2006; Sklair, 2006). The same, I argue, applies to the enshrinement of historic buildings as monuments. Bob Catterall's (2006) suggestion that 'the contemptuous culture of consumerism' and the 'actual and symbolic devastation of cities' only appear 'invincible to those who spend too much time in the marketplace' (p. 2) offers an optimistic outlook. From a distance, or so it seems, we realise the 'true nature' of urbanisation processes under financialised capitalism. However, attempts to save the city are often shaped by market interests, too. We have no other choice than to stay in the marketplace and develop a political critique of urban form from within. Given the central role of visual arguments in urbanisation processes, critical urban theorists must pay attention to the interrelation between politics and

aesthetics. The potential of scrutinising this relationship becomes clear when we do not merely criticise the visual outcome of political negotiations but develop a visual critique of political negotiations. There is a real need for developing visual accounts that contest the activities of the state and the ordering of social relations; accounts that are political because they reframe what the city was and what it is.

An understanding of skylines as phantasmagoria of capitalist culture contests the ways in which both advocates and opponents of commercial skyscrapers view London. Advocates claim that the construction of additional towers can be used to visually enhance historic landmark buildings. Opponents argue that the historic skyline should be preserved. According to the former, tall buildings are needed to re-stabilise monuments. The latter offer monuments as structures whose stable position in the cityscape needs to be defended. Both distract from power relations in urbanisation processes based on an essentialist image of a well-ordered city. Both view the city through the lens of compositional wholeness and produce an easily marketable city image that abstracts from the city's commodification and financialisation.

In this article, I drew attention to the destructiveness of capitalist culture and I identified St Paul's as a ruin, whose hollowing out of a stable collective meaning has, however, not disrupted an ideology of economic growth and a historicist reading of the city. Still, the cathedral's status as a ruin is a positive example of a split between signifier and signified. Crucially, an office tower is also never merely the result of a successful attempt of profit maximisation. It is always also an 'un-office tower' or, better, the built manifestation of unrealised possibilities. This is why claims that London's historic skyline is being 'wrecked' are nothing else than a glorification of urban processes under financialised capitalism. Suggestions that the city is getting 'destroyed' are not focused enough. The term is mostly used in a generic sense, referring to any process that puts an end to anything material or immaterial. I use the term 'ruination' to explore the contemporary city and, at the same time, to align questions about what the city ought to be with questions how the city is viewed. Ruination, in this sense, is a political critique that opens up possibilities for a different city.

References

- Arendt, H. (1970) *On Violence*. London: Allen Lane.
- Benjamin, W. (1991) *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I–VII, eds R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (with T. Adorno and G. Scholem). Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Benjamin, W. (1998) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (2002) *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2005a [1929]) 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1*, eds M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, pp. 207–221. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2005b [1931]) 'Karl Kraus', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2*, eds M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, pp. 433–458. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2006a [1939]) 'Central Park', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4*, eds H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, pp. 161–199. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2006b [1940]) 'On the Concept of History', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4*, eds H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, pp. 389–400. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Boyer, C. M. (1996) *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Buck-Morss, S. (1991) *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Catterall, B. (2006) 'Editorial', *City* 10(1), pp. 1–2.
- Campkin, B. (2013) *Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Charney, I. (2007) 'The Politics of design: Architecture, tall buildings and the skyline of central London', *Area* 39(2), pp. 195–205.
- Cohen, M. (1995) *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, M. (2014) 'Benjamin and Surrealism', in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetic*, ed. M. Kelly, pp. 362–366. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) (2000) *By Design: Urban design in the planning system*. London: CABE.
- Corporation of London (CoL) (2002) *City of London Unitary Development Plan*. London: Corporation of London.
- Davidson, M. and Iveson, K. (2014) 'Recovering the politics of the city: From the "post-political city" to a "method of equality" for critical urban geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, pp. 1–17. doi: 0309132514535284.
- Deleuze, G. (2006) *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2016) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Dodd, N. (2008) 'Goethe in Palermo: Urphänomen and Analogical Reasoning in Simmel and Benjamin', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 8(4), pp. 411–445.
- Finkelde, D. (2009) 'The Presence of the Baroque: Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in Contemporary Contexts', in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rolf J. Goebel, pp. 46–69. New York: Camden House.
- Foucault, M. (2010) *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilloch, G. (1996) *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gilloch, G. (2002) *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Graham, S. (2015a) 'Luxified skies: How vertical urban housing became an elite preserve', *City* 19(5), pp. 618–645.
- Graham, S. (2015b) 'Life support: The political ecology of urban air', *City* 19(2–3), pp. 192–215.

- Greater London Authority (GLA) (2012) *London View Management Framework: The London Plan Supplementary Planning Guidance*. London: Greater London Authority.
- Grubbauer, M. (2014) 'Architecture, Economic Imaginaries and Urban Politics: The Office Tower as Socially Classifying Device', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38(1), pp. 336–359.
- Harris, A. (2008) 'Livingstone versus Serota: The high-rise battle of Bankside', *The London Journal* 33(3), pp. 289–299
- Harvey, D. (1989) 'From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: The transformation of urban governance in late capitalism', *Geografiska Annaler* 71, pp. 3–17.
- Harvey, D. (2008) 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review* 53, pp. 23–40.
- Harvey, D. (2012) *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso.
- Jencks, C. (2006) 'The iconic building is here to stay', *City* 10(1), pp. 3–20.
- Jones, P. (2009) 'Putting Architecture in its Social Place: A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture', *Urban Studies* 46(12), pp. 2519–2536.
- Jones, P. (2011) *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Kaika, M. and Thielen, K. (2006) 'Form follows power: A genealogy of urban shrines', *City* 10(1), pp. 59–69.
- Kaika, M. (2011) 'Autistic architecture: The fall of the icon and the rise of the serial object of architecture', *Environment and Planning D* 29(6), pp. 968–992.
- Madden, D. and Marcuse, P. (2016) *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*. London: Verso.
- Marx, K. (1990) *Capital, Vol. 1*. London: Penguin.
- McNeill, D. (2002a) 'The Mayor and the World City Skyline: London's Tall Buildings Debate', *International Planning Studies* 7(4), pp. 325–334.
- McNeill, D. (2002b) 'Livingstone's London: Left Politics and the World City', *Regional Studies* 36(1), pp. 75–80.
- McNeill, D. (2006) 'Globalization and the ethics of architectural design', *City* 10(1), pp. 49–58.
- Moreno, L. (2014) 'The urban process under financialised capitalism', *City* 18(3), pp. 244–268.
- Moussavi, F. (2009) 'The Function of Form' in *The Function of Form*, ed. F. Moussavi et al., pp. 7–45. Cambridge, MA: Actar and Harvard University Graduate School of Design.
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (OoDPM) (2002) *Heron Public Inquiry: Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (Section 77), Application by Heron (London) Properties Limited*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- Pain, K. (2009) 'London – The Pre-eminent Global City', *GaWC Research Bulletin* 328. Accessed 20 April 2016. <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb328.html>
- Sklair, L. (2006) 'Iconic architecture and capitalist globalization', *City* 10(1), pp. 21–47.
- Strauss, A. (1976) *Images of the American City*. New Jersey: Transaction.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2009) 'The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City: In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(3), pp. 601–620.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2011) *Civic City Cahier 5: Designing the Post-Political City and the Insurgent Polis*. London: Bedford Press.
- Tavernor, R. (2002) *Heron Public Inquiry: Proof of Evidence*. London: Tavernor Consultancy.
- Tavernor, R. (2004a) 'From Townscape to Skyscape', *The Architectural Review* 1285, pp. 78–83.
- Tavernor, R. (2004b) 'On the Art of Urban Design', *Designio* 1, pp. 35–58.
- Tavernor, R. (2007) 'Composing London Visually', in *Visualizing the City*, eds A. R. Marcus and D. Neumann. London: Routledge.
- Tiedemann, R. (2002) 'Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passagen-Werk', in *The Arcades Project*, pp. 929–945. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Willis, C. (1995) *Form follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

- Wolin, R. (1994) *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zukin, S. (1991) *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Günter Gassner is a Lecturer in Urban Design in the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. E-mail: GassnerG@cardiff.ac.uk